

Toward Operational Art in Special Warfare

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Hybrid irregular and conventional military operations are playing an increasingly prominent role in international conflict, exploited by countries such as Russia and Iran. To counter this trend, the United States should adopt a new form of operational art for special warfare. This report proposes a framework for the design and execution of special warfare campaigns.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Is special warfare relevant to today's conflicts?
- How should special warfare campaigns be designed?
- What capabilities are necessary to successfully conduct special warfare campaigns?
- What are the strategic advantages and risks of employing special warfare?



KEY FINDINGS

Special Warfare Campaigns Call on Capabilities Across the Joint Force and U.S. Government to Advance U.S. Policy Objectives

- Special warfare campaigns have a distinctive focus that could include stabilizing or destabilizing a targeted regime, employing local partners as the main campaign effort, and maintaining a small U.S. footprint in the targeted country. They also may employ political warfare methods to mobilize, neutralize, or integrate individuals or groups from the tactical to the strategic levels.
- Special warfare campaigns are typically of long duration and may require extensive preparatory work better measured in months (or years) than in days.
- Special warfare campaigns require intensive interagency cooperation. For example, the U.S. Department of Defense may be subordinate to the U.S. Department of State or the Central Intelligence Agency.

There Is a Need to Adapt Conventional Operational Art to the Unique Characteristics of Special Warfare

- Commanders and planners must be proficient in all relevant forms of operational art, including special warfare, if they are to design successful campaigns across the full range of military operations in modern conflicts.
- Keeping special warfare within the joint operational art construct will enable collaboration between special operations and conventional forces; the principles of operational art connect tactical actions and strategic objectives by supporting the design of successful campaigns.
- Special warfare makes a unique contribution to operational art in terms of the mobilization of partners' strategic and operational centers of gravity, and the neutralization or integration of the enemy's, in the human domain.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- There should be a joint effort to educate special warfare campaign planners as a way of strengthening special warfare strategic and operational planning capabilities. At the same time, because special warfare campaigns are inherently joint efforts, the special warfare community should help joint organizations develop a special warfare planning culture.
- Special warfare commanders and planners should help policymakers explore the implications of particular strategic objectives. Policymakers, in turn, should strive to provide clear policy guidance to inform the development of campaign plans.
- The special operations community should consider establishing a general officer-level operational headquarters element as a way to remedy the current ad hoc command-and-control architecture that has inhibited special warfare commanders' ability to participate in theater-level planning.



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